

Material Memory Season 3, Episode 4
“If Walls Could Talk”

Transcript

[Music]

Narration: Hello, and welcome to season three of *Material Memory*. I am your host, Sharon M. Burney. This stop on our HBCU Library Alliance tour takes us to Lorman, Mississippi, where we'll be speaking with Blanche Sanders from Alcorn State University. We'll be time traveling in this episode between life on campus in the 1960s and today, with the help of Alcorn's oral history collection, "If Walls Could Talk."

A quick warning that this episode contains references to racial violence and trauma.

And now, a little about our guest...

Blanche Sanders: I am Blanche Sanders from Alcorn State University. I have been working here since 1996. I started out in circulation, and I've been working in the dean role, since 2008, to current.

Sharon Burney: Tell me about the first time you remember falling in love with the library.

Blanche Sanders: I come from an educated family. Everybody had to go to school. So my mom was always reading. We had to read books. We had to go to the library and select a book. And as we got older, we even had to write an article on books. And so my mom was a teacher. All her siblings were teachers, even her brothers were teachers.

Narration: Blanche planned on becoming a teacher herself, but she did ultimately go to library school.

Blanche Sanders: So when I did go to library school, everything was, everything just came to life. You know, everything, the pages came to life. And so when I came back from library school, I was appointed circulation librarian, and archivist. And learning about the research of this area helped me to learn about Alcorn. And I had a great assistant because she was born at Alcorn State. And she knew about the areas, and we had a great time working together. So since then, she has retired. I told her she couldn't leave me. And she said, it's time to go. So, it's been a journey and I'm still learning.

Sharon Burney: Let's talk about the archives at Alcorn state.

Blanche Sanders: Our collection is based on college catalogs, year books, history books, almanacs, and things of that sort. So it's university documents, and we have a couple of external collections. And we have some oral histories up there.

Sharon Burney: Let's start to talk a little bit about the oral histories. So who are these people that you have the oral histories from?

Blanche Sanders: The oral history project was students that attended the college at that time, and they were having conversations about their stay here at the university and their experiences.

Sharon Burney: What year were these students attending Alcorn?

Blanche Sanders: This was in the sixties.

Sharon Burney: OK.

Blanche Sanders: We had about ten of them come back and really just sit back and just talk about it. And I named it "If Walls Could Talk," because when they got back and sat in their dormitories and some of their experiences they were proud of, and some of them, they weren't because some of them dealt with civil rights issues. And, they had to go through some healing at the same time. And it wasn't, you know, such a pleasant experience.

Narration: Blanche was struck by how different the experience was for students on campus back then.

Blanche Sanders: Alcorn had revolutionized since the 1960s, of course, and the academic programs had grown and the socialization of the students had changed, because male and female could not even have any contact rather than, you know, all of the, the, things

Sharon Burney: ... fraternization [laugh]

Blanche Sanders: ...that the students are doing now. And, as we had conversation before, the females couldn't even wear pants. And how religion was mandatory three times a day.

Sharon Burney: Wow.

Blanche Sanders: Three times a day.

Narration: These weren't the only restrictions governing student life.

Blanche Sanders: They didn't have the fancy foods and stuff like that. They would give them a peanut butter sandwich. And that was a delicacy. And some of them were talking about, you know, how we just get up and said, we're going home for the weekend? They couldn't do that. They had to actually check out. They had to get a note from their parents, from the dorm aide, to say that they can go home. And then they had to be back at a certain time. And the dorm aide had to call their mothers and say that they were back.

Narration: But as we know, the 1960s were a time when students across the country pushed for change, even on their own campuses.

Blanche Sanders: There were two major protests during the sixties, civil rights protests. And there was a protest about a professor or something that he stated concerning the NAACP. And the students did not like it.

Narration: There have been multiple student protests at Alcorn. In April 1964, a mere two months before the start of Mississippi Freedom Summer, in response to the high cost of student fees and social restrictions, students at Alcorn marched in protest around the campus. As they passed dorms, they asked other students to join; ultimately 800 of the 1,100 students came out that night. Instead of meeting with the students, the university's president ordered 57 Mississippi State troopers to surround the football stadium where the students had gathered and locked them in overnight. In the morning, the university suspended all 800 students and chartered buses to send them home without their belongings. Among the student protesters that evening was 19-year-old Charles Moore, who we'll come back to in a moment.

Blanche Sanders: But whatever they had to endure, they had to persevere. They didn't want to give up. And they had so much advice to give us. And they wanted us to sit down and talk to the students to tell them that they have so much freedom now.

Narration: Many college campuses have student protests that are erased from history, which makes it more important that Alcorn is capturing these stories. Activists carry a heavy burden. They courageously speak out on unpopular opinions, pushing society forward in ways that make them vulnerable to criticism. Sometimes, they draw criticism from the very people they are fighting for, even within their own families. This work can be lonely and often takes physical and mental tolls. Activists choose this advocacy to protect the people in their communities, propel society forward, and to give a voice to those who feel they cannot join them in this struggle.

Blanche Sanders: In that collection, one of the students, when she was on the forum, she talked about that and she said there were so many things that were going on, she couldn't express herself, she had to just hold her peace and just go to class and do the necessary. But when she went to her room, she just began to cry and she just didn't know who to talk to, and didn't know how to share, because she wanted to go to school, and she didn't want to go home. And if she had gotten thrown out of school, she would have to go home, and she wouldn't get the education. So she just began to really vent. And she just, she just said, when I was at Alcorn, she said, "If the walls could just talk and just respond back to me, maybe I wouldn't have gone through all the bloodshed and tears."

Narration: The decision to participate in protest carries a heavier burden for some than others. Possible disruptions of finances, education, health, and relationships can make for a dire decision. And sometimes the stakes are even higher...

On June 25, 1964, just two months after the Alcorn protests, former student protester [Charles Moore](#) and his friend Henry Dee were targeted by the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Charles and Henry were kidnapped, brutally tortured, and beaten. Still alive, they were thrown chained into the Mississippi River. Moore and Dee's bodies were accidentally discovered in July 1964, during the FBI search for the [three civil rights workers](#) missing during the Freedom Summer protests. Forty-three years later, on June 14, 2007, former police officer and Ku Klux Klan member James Seale was convicted in the murders of Charles Moore and Henry Dee. The somber reality for people who protest is that their choice can mean life or death. And many of the people who wanted to protest but felt they couldn't can carry this guilt and pain forward with them.

Blanche Sanders: All the things that they had to go through, you know, they went through so much civil rights stuff. They, they were brutalized. The dorms were set on fire. You know, they had to go through so much.

Narration: Oral history testimonies have the potential to both re-open and heal these old wounds.

Blanche Sanders: They couldn't really express themselves externally. You only could express yourself inside.

Sharon Burney: Right, so now you gave them power. You empowered them with this, did the oral histories.

Blanche Sanders: Yeah. Right. And then, then when you can't express yourself, it causes a lot of emotional trauma.

Narration: Blanche and her team provided a safe place where alumni could reflect on their experiences holistically—both the beautiful and the unpleasant parts—and admit truths that they might not have been comfortable sharing at the time.

Blanche Sanders: You know, we're all here to just get our work, and they couldn't even walk out of their room. And when they'd go and complain to the administration—and if you weren't, or maybe I shouldn't say it though... if you weren't a certain color, you were an outcast.

Sharon Burney: That's the truth, though.

Blanche Sanders: You're an outcast. You had to, you had to be a certain color to be recognized.

Sharon Burney: Yeah, I mean, that was a true part of our history and still is to a certain extent. Colorism still exists.

Narration: As Black people in the US, we may no longer be subjected to the literal brown paper bag test; however, the internalized harm of colorism still lingers and manifests in the harmful assumption that light skin and the pursuit of White adjacency is more attractive. The result of this is access to greater privilege for light-skinned Black people, both outside and inside the Black community. While we have made strides to combat this, we still have much to do. That is what makes these oral histories significant. They provide a context of reflection so we can break these cycles.

The honesty reflected in the hardships vocalized by those interviewed is a testament to their love of Alcorn, and the trust for the team doing this work.

Blanche Sanders: One of those individuals that were a part of that, they're still around here at Alcorn state. Yeah. Over 70 years, and his son, he works here, Dr. Melvin Williams. He had been a part of Alcorn State since he was about five years old when he came to stay with his father, and his father came to Alcorn State so that his children could receive an education, because it wasn't likely for your children to receive an education. You had to move away from home, wherever you were, in order for your children to receive an education. And it was very profound. He matriculated through the system and became a part of the staff. He was the dean of academic affairs. He was interim president and now he's on external committees and he still has an attachment to Alcorn. And he stated when he got married, he said he and his wife had been married for over 55 years. And when he first met his wife, he told her that they would not live in Lorman, and guess what, they're still here [laugh].

Narration: 70 years at Alcorn! Dr. William's story is a more extreme version of Blanche's own experience. Alcorn became a home for them, offering a family, a community, and a career that

sustained them through life. The foundation of this trust in Alcorn isn't built on the university's promise, but rather its follow through.

Blanche Sanders: You know, when you really just sit down and just listen to the experiences that the students have gone through, during that time, you can really appreciate education. You can appreciate what they fought for. You can appreciate their values, their mores, and the longevity of just being a student and not really just saying, okay, I'm going to college. It was more than that. It was more than that. It was a sacrifice. They made many sacrifices. And when I think about the sacrifices that they made, they get so emotional because they wanted an education, and they weren't gonna give up. They weren't gonna give up by any means, you know?

Narration: Far too often, predominately White institutions (or PWIs) descend into Black and Brown neighborhoods to collect oral histories in ways that commodify the local populations. These PWIs are using the people at the center of these stories to obtain large research grants, book deals, documentaries, and the like, while the community experts receive little to nothing. There is a considerable difference when an HBCU collects these stories, as they are collecting them with their community. The former students, faculty, and staff know that the stories of their sacrifices, joy, and pain are shared with someone they can trust.

[Music]

Sharon Burney: We often say in our community—we talk about how it takes a village, right? It takes a village to raise a child. And so we look at everything from a village standpoint. How do you view the library as a village?

Blanche Sanders: Well, I always tell them, we are family here, you know, we are more than we are with our personal families. So we have to be creative in caring for each other and expressing a love for each other, you know, during the time that we are here.

Narration: Family members, of course, don't always see eye-to-eye. As a library leader, Blanche has tried to make the Alcorn library family a place where everyone can work together.

Blanche Sanders: We have professional development, and you know, we'd go to different workshops and everything. So what I did, I paired employees up, and the ones that quote unquote, "didn't like each other," I paired them up and I said, "You're gonna have to work together," I said, "just like you do [with] your children. This is your brother, this is your sister, you're gonna work together and we're gonna work this out." And so they end up working together, with a working relationship. I said, now, what do you do after five o'clock, you know, that's your business, but from eight to five or whatever your schedule is, we're family. And I express that all the time.

Narration: Blanche is also aware of her own role in creating a healthy work family.

Blanche Sanders: And I said, what I need you to do is send me a motivational email or, you know, just give me something or send me a song to make me dance or something, you know? And they just got a kick out of it. So, and then sometimes I just bring lunch and just let them interface. And I'm not really a party person, but I just let them have their music and just socialize. And then when I leave, I guess they really just turn it up. I always tell them that "I don't want you to be threatened when you see me, as I want to be a part of you all." [laugh]

Narration: Blanche understands the importance of these younger generations of HBCU librarians. She has been working on the issue of BIPOC recruitment and retention both in and outside of her library.

Sharon Burney: You've been appointed to the executive board of the Mississippi Library Association, where you will serve as chair of the MLA black caucus round table. Can you tell us more about your new appointment?

Blanche Sanders: One of the things that we're trying to do is motivate minorities to become a part of the field. And one of the things that we do is offer a cash scholarship, the [Virgia Brock-Shedd Scholarship](#), to a student that's in the program. And we just don't want them to just go to school. We want to continue in leadership in the field. We want to be active and continue to revolutionize librarianship because when you go to different conferences, you don't see many minorities, especially holding leadership positions. And so we want to continue to be able to speak on social and cultural and diversity issues and change the world view.

Narration: She's right. It isn't enough to have BIPOC people working in libraries. We need to be leading them too. Blanche has some ideas for how we can accomplish this.

Blanche Sanders: It takes everybody working together, because when students graduate from higher ed institutions, they have to be prepared, not only just completing their degree, but they have to be prepared to provide that leadership. And so it's gonna take everybody working together, not just minorities, but just to keep the field of librarianship open and moving forward because everybody thinks that technology is gonna just change everything. We don't even need libraries anymore. They just think, just take the books out and just use the computers.

Narration: To Blanche, the answer to this problem is building relationships and working together. But it's also about confronting assumptions and thinking about infrastructure.

Sharon Burney: One of the questions I ask every speaker is: if they could have three wishes for their library and money wasn't a concern, what would they be?

Blanche Sanders: If money was not a concern... Well, money *is* the concern, but ... [laugh].

Narration: And the truth is, many HBCUs have been systemically under-resourced since their [founding](#). While Alcorn's students have more resources today than their forebears did in the 1960s, funding disparities between HBCUs and PWIs remain profoundly inequitable. Yet the appeal of an unlimited budget produced a dream of her ideal library.

Blanche Sanders: I will have more resources for the students

Sharon Burney: What would that look like?

Blanche Sanders: The library will look like a home away from home. They will have a place that they can come in and lounge and study at the same time. And the library will look different. The lighting will look different. There will be areas of engagement. And then there will be areas of solitude. Then there'll be collaboration, there'll be makerspaces. Then there'll be 3D printers.

Narration: I worked in a Black studies department at a PWI for many years before coming to CLIR and it struck me listening to Blanche that if she had access to unlimited funding, she would give her library the infrastructure that many people at PWIs take for granted.

Blanche Sanders: I will have internet spaces where they could come and sit at the internet bar. I always want to have the internet bar. And I would have the sliding doors where they can go in and have their meetings. And I want a sound room where the students in the band, they can go and practice their music and, and not be afraid that they're going to disturb somebody, you know? And the auditorium that we have, it would be, it would be different. The library would be full of technology in every way. I mean it will be twenty-first-century because now it's simple. The services are simple, because we have simple money. We don't have any money.

Narration: Alcorn's limited resources have little to do with its leadership or fiscal management, and almost everything to do with the long history of racist policies and decisions that have kept [HBCUs](#) and the communities around them [chronically underfunded](#). It makes Alcorn's accomplishments that much more impressive.

Sharon Burney: I saw that Alcorn State won an award this year.

Blanche Sanders: Oh, yeah.

Sharon Burney: Tell me about the award and how it's significant. I think you won an award for outreach, community and campus outreach, leadership. Speak to the significance and the importance of outreach in libraries.

Blanche Sanders: Well, Alcorn is situated in the rural community, and we want to be accessible to the community and with that, we just can't really just sit here and do our jobs. And that goes beyond checking out a book, you know, answering a reference question. We had to get out and let the community know that the J.D. Boyd Library staff is here to meet your community needs. Ever since I've been on staff, we go to Jefferson County, which is one of the surrounding counties. We go to Claiborne County, Adams County, and Warren County. And we are showing some families that we care.

Sharon Burney: So give us some examples of some of the programs you've created for those communities.

Blanche Sanders: OK, we've done story readings. And for Thanksgiving we do food bags for the needy. We've taken food to the needy. And for national women's month, we had a civil rights leader come out from the surrounding county, which was phenomenal. Oh, she was phenomenal. She had gone through so much during civil rights. If you had been here, you could just feel, you could just feel the hurt, the achievement and all of that. We work with the nurseries. We pulled all the nurseries in the area together, and we have an activity with them because this is the next generation. These are the ones that we're gonna be recruiting for Alcorn State University. And some of them may be a part of the library staff.

Blanche Sanders: We'll even go to the nursing home.

Sharon Burney: Oh, wow. Tell me about that.

Blanche Sanders: Oh, I just love it. I love it. We go to the nursing home, but you know, doing COVID is a little bit different, but on the regular we go and we read stories to them. We sing to them, and they enjoy it so much and so they didn't want us to leave. And we had, we always take socks or something, some kind of toiletries that they can use. And they invite us back every year.

Narration: With a community-centered approach to librarianship, the impact of Alcorn's focus on relationships is evident by the dedication of Alcorn's alumni. After our interview concluded, Blanche mentioned to me that one family sent all 13 of its children to Alcorn and in the process set a Guinness World Record for the family with the most siblings graduating from an HBCU. Another example of this alumni dedication is a story Blanche recounted about meeting the Alcorn University homecoming queen of 1963.

Blanche Sanders: We were collecting history. And I think that the Alcorn University queen of 1963, I think. She was so excited about the archive in Alcorn State University. She met me in Vicksburg, and she gave us her original crown. And she said, "I have carried this crown with pride and with dignity," she said, "and I want Alcorn State University to have it." And, you know what? My heart just dropped because I was like, "Oh, my goodness if anything happened to this crown." And it wasn't really ... and, you know, the thing about it, it wasn't a real, like a metal crown, as we would say, it was like a handmade crown. It was a handmade crown with rhinestones in it.

Narration: It isn't the rhinestones that make this crown a treasure, but the legacy of the community it represents. Alcorn's village approach is reflected in the continuous support that occurs long after graduation. It is present in the lifelong love and dedication from staff, faculty, and alumni. The Alcorn State University motto is, "Where Knowledge and Character Matter," and this is evident in the work of Blanche Sanders and the Alcorn Library, where the library is more than a building, it is a village and a family.

[Music]

Narration: Thanks for joining us. To learn more about the collections at Alcorn State University, check out our show notes at material-memory.clir.org. In our next episode, we'll be talking with Dana Chandler at Tuskegee University, about that university's rich archival collection.

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Material Memory is produced by CLIR with the assistance of Nicole Kang Ferraiolo, Kathlin Smith, and Lizzi Albert, and our staff editorial team, Jennifer Ferretti, Alyson Pope, and Gayle Schechter. Drum music is by Kofi Horne.

I'm your host, Sharon M. Burney, and this is *Material Memory*.